DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 462 CS 213 372

AUTHOR Fox, Helen
TITLE What in the World Is "Analysis?" Lessons from Non-Western Graduate Students.
PUB DATE 20 Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Thinking; Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; *Foreign Students; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Non Western Civilization; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship; *Thinking Skills; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Communication Styles; World Views

ABSTRACT

A five-year exploratory study investigated the difficulties with analytical writing experienced by 16 graduate students from 12 non-western countries. Freshman writing program handbook definitions of "analysis" were surveyed; seven professors of international graduate students were interviewed on their definitions of "analysis" or "analytical writing"; each of the professors offered examples of student writing demonstrating "good analysis" and "poor analysis"; and international students were interviewed about their difficulties in writing for the American university. These explorations led to the conclusion that critical thinking made visible (that is, analytical writing) is not so much a mental process or intellectual skill, as a culturally specific world view that is individualistic, egalitarian, scientific, and is based on a direct, sparse communication style that relies on little shared knowledge better writer and audience. Students from non-western cultures, on the other hand, tend to value indirectness or more roundabout communication strategies, expect the reader to infer a great deal that is left unstated, value tradition and authority more than "originality," and find it inappropriate or unfruitful to critique authorities in a field, especially while a student. Teachers who realize the culture-bound nature of critical thinking and analysis will be able to use "difference language" rather than "deficit language" when working with international students, and will find it easier to help them understand what they are doing, what Western teachers do, and how to work together to bridge the gap. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED346462

Paper: Conference on College Composition and Communication
Cincinnati, Ohio
March 20, 1992

Dr. Helen Fox
University of Michigan
English Composition Board
1025 Angell Hall
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS "ANALYSIS"? LESSONS FROM NON-WESTERN GRADUATE STUDENTS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Helen Fox

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS213372

Paper: Conference on College Composition and Communication
Cincinnati, Ohio
March 20, 1992

Dr. Helen Fox
University of Michigan
English Composition Board
1025 Angell Hall
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS "ANALYSIS"? LESSONS FROM NON-WESTERN GRADUATE STUDENTS

I recently ordered an examination copy of a new college handbook, and just for fun, because I knew that I would be speaking on a panel on critical thinking, I looked up a definition that I'd like to read to you. And while I do, I'd like you to think of a word or phrase that summarizes your reaction to it.

> What Is Critical Thinking?
>
> Critical thinking can refer to virtually every mental process, including daydreaming, joking, regretting, remembering, problem solving, judging, or interpreting. One type of thinking -- musing -- is a psychological process that helps us make sense of our world, form our beliefs and confirm our opinions. Another, perhaps more dynamic type -- analytic thinking -- requires objectivity and interpretation and is the mainstay of evaluating, reasoning, arguing, or persuading . . . above all, we want to emphasize that critical thinking is a process of questioning -- of asking why? and how? and of carefully weighing the ideas and opinions you encounter, rather than simply accepting them at face value.
>
> (The Riverside Handbook, 1992, p. 30)

What do you think of this definition? (Audience reaction ranged from "pretty good," to "all-inclusive," "vague.")

Now imagine you are a graduate student from a non-western country -- Somalia, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, or Brazil. You are perhaps an older student, a successful, mid-career professional,

CS213372

coming back to school for a master's or doctoral degree. You may be a published writer in your own country, maybe even in English. However, you are told by your professors that you need to "think more critically," or "write more analytically." You are told your writing needs "improvement." So you go to a book for a definition. Is this one likely to be helpful?

This is the kind of non-definition that I found perplexing as I embarked on a five-year exploratory study at the Center for International Education (CIE) at the University of Massachusetts, of the difficulties with analytical writing experienced by sixteen graduate students from twelve countries: Korea, Japan, The People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia, Cape Verde, Brazil and Chile (Fox, 1991).

I had been asked to create a course in "analytical writing" for these students, as some of the professors (who had worked with students from developing countries for 15-20 years, and who had also worked in many of their home countries) felt that these students had some unspecified "difficulties" in the area of "analysis." So, I decided, the first thing to do was to find out what exactly this thing was that the students couldn't do well.

To do this, I looked at a stack of handbooks in the offices of the university's freshman writing program for a definition of "analysis." The results were interesting. Several, such as Corbett's Little English Handbook (5th Edition), which is used routinely at CIE as a writer's elementary reference book, had no

mention of the term. One (Herman's Portable English Handbook, 1986) had a rather snide reference, from the student's point of view, in the "Glossary of Usage" (p.387): "Analyzation -- Illiterate for analysis." The book makes no other mention of the term. A perhaps more typical example is found in the index of Kolln's Language and Composition: A Handbook and Rhetoric: "Analysis. See Division." "We use division, sometimes called analysis, in an expository essay when we explain an event or a place or an entity by analyzing its parts." (1984, p.300)

I am giving you these examples not to criticize handbooks, necessarily, but to let you see why I began to suspect that this vagueness, this lack of precision, these curiously circular definitions were an indication of something interesting and important.

This hunch was strengthened when I talked with professors; I interviewed seven of them, all of whom had a good deal of experience working with international graduate students, and asked them their definition of "analysis" or "analytical writing." This question seemed to put them on the spot; it was hard for them to come up with a definition, though they all seemed to have an intuitive understanding of what they were looking for on students' papers. In order to help them with their thinking about this, I asked them each to show me four pieces of writing, either course papers, master's projects or doctoral theses. Two of these texts should be an example of what they would call "good analysis" and two of what they would call

"poor analysis." The "good" papers, I told them, could come from any graduate students, while the "poor" papers should come from "non-Western" graduate students, so I could get an idea of the specific nature of problem I was looking at.

Though the features they described varied somewhat from professor to professor (which was interesting in itself), in general they seemed to be describing something like this: In "good analysis," there should be a direct statement of the problem or the main idea. There should be the explicit asking and answering of "why?" and "how?" questions, something I have recently heard described as "thinking made visible." (But what kind of thinking? Not the daydreaming, joking, regretting, or remembering in the handbook definition, but the translation of thoughts, perhaps even these kinds of thoughts, into direct questioning and answering.) There should be some kind of signposting to describe the direction of the argument, that is, headings and subheadings, transition words, or other clear, logical connections between ideas. There should be a critique of authorities, rather than just a parroting of their ideas. There should be clear evidence of the student's own point of view. The paper should bring together a number of ideas from different documents or from the student's own data -- and it should weave this material together rather than state it sequentially. And finally, there should be correct, meticulous referencing of the ideas of others.

After studying these characteristics and talking with the

international students themselves at length about their difficulties writing for the U.S. university, I came to the conclusion that "analysis," or, we might say, "critical thinking," is not so much a mental process or intellectual skill, but a cultural world view, based on the following characteristics:

1) A DIRECT COMMUNICATION STYLE

This directness or explicitness is what is implied in the phrase "thinking made visible," as well as in the need for signposting, and in the direct, sometimes almost painfully logical connections between ideas that we look for in "analytical" writing. However, as students told me -- students from as disparate cultures as Indonesia, Chile, Somalia and Korea -- directness as a communication style is rare, worldwide. The straightforwardness we expect is seen by many of the students I interviewed as "rude" or "childish" or "insulting to the intelligence" of the audience. A Japanese student, for example, talks about how U.S. academic style sounds to her:

> It sounds so dry, so inhumane. It's clear, but it feels like something's missing. Like a skeleton, there's no juicy, meaty part in it. It's sort of like reading the suggested answers to a question. Here's the question, here's the answer.

In most cultures, students told me, roundabout strategies are considered elegant, sophisticated, polite, kind, and above all, interesting. A student from Cote d'Ivoire says:

> You try to make a sort of suspense, and as we say "it brings appetite to the conversation," you know? The person is ... "what is he or she going to tell me?" And you sort of pull him to listen to you, you see?"

And finally you say it. And by the time you say it, you are also at the end of what you are going to say.

2) A STYLE THAT RELIES ON LITTLE SHARED KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN WRITER AND AUDIENCE

The dominant communication style in the U.S. -- both oral and written -- requires very explicit spelling out of details, as if the audience were unable to figure out anything that is hazy or implied. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall calls a culture that uses this kind of communication a "low context culture," as differentiated from a "high context culture," in which the reader or listener is expected to infer a great deal that is left unstated. (According to Hall, the U.S. is not the lowest on the explicitness scale; the Swiss-Germans, the Germans and the Scandinavians make things even more obvious than we do (1976, p.91).

To students from a high context culture, the details and precision we value in U.S. academic writing may sound a little stupid or insulting to the intelligence of the audience -- perhaps a little like it sounds when someone has to explain a joke to a person who "doesn't get it." And since in these high context cultures more shared knowledge is assumed between speaker and audience, when the student tries to write for the U.S. university, audience problems may seem especially pronounced. For example, in a qualitative research study done by a student from Sri Lanka, whole sections of interviews that contained the most revealing data were left out, though the conclusions hinted

at this material and suggested that what had been left out was clear proof of her claim -- although the claim itself was also unclear. It is interesting, too, that this doctoral student did not understand why the professor couldn't make heads or tails of this paper, and was unable to change it substantially when the problem was explained to her.

3) A CULTURAL EMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUALISM

In the U.S., and in the west in general, we stress "originality," by which we mean that the writer should come up with something creative, something new, that is the product of an individual's own thinking. In contrast, most cultures around the world value tradition and authority -- the wisdom of the past rather than newness -- and may assume that we do, as well. For example, a student from Sri Lanka who had spoken English fluently for over thirty years discovered during an interview with me that the meaning of the word "original" in the western context was completely different from her conception of it. Her assumption that an "original line of reasoning" meant "ancient, still with the original meaning" had got her into trouble with one of her professors, who had told her, "This is not original . . . you can't keep reproducing what others have done." "Back home," she told me, "if I said, "This is original, this is what I mean," it would have no value."

This emphasis on tradition and group harmony create a tendency for writers to merge author, authorities and audience -- in marked contrast to the concern for the documentation of

sources, the careful sorting out of whose idea is whose that is expected in the U.S. academic context. The tendency to blur or even obliterate an individual's opinion can also result in a writer's reluctance to sort out conflicting interpretations and saying which one (s)he thinks is the best or most plausible. Not only have these students not had much experience writing "analytically" (because of the cultural value placed on overt harmony) but they may also find it difficult to understand the needs of the western audience and to feel that these needs are valid -- that they "make sense."

4) AN ASSUMPTION OF EGALITARIANISM

Because of the cultural value placed on equality -- or at least the appearance of equality -- in the U.S., students in this context are used to the idea of critiquing authorities, even if they may find it hard to do. For example, an assignment in international education may ask graduate students to take on the persona of a consultant to the United Nations; even undergraduates at the University of Michigan have been asked to imagine they are advisors to the cabinet of a new government in a developing nation, and to give their opinion on what kind of constitution they should write, or what form of democracy is best for their country.

But for students coming from cultures where it is not assumed that everyone is more or less equal (or even that it might be good to be able to assume this), such an assignment can be very difficult to do. Students emphasized to me that this

does not mean they are not capable of being critical: they may be very critical outside of class, among intimates, or in the privacy of their own thoughts. But their papers tend not to show this criticism of authorities because it is not considered appropriate or fruitful to focus on conflict, especially while one is still a student.

This tendency to simply quote authors without critique is sometimes misinterpreted by U.S. professors. As one told me in an interview:

> Our culture believes in the value of thinking and the value of self-expression. But some international students don't know what analysis is; it's totally foreign to them. It's something that's been explicitly trained out of them. Their school system has taught them "Thou shalt not think, thou shalt not speak, thou shalt repeat." They've had the curiosity beaten out of them.

This assumption that writing represents thinking, and that critical writing represents critical thinking is particularly painful for these students, especially in view of the definition in the handbook, which includes just about every type of thinking as "critical." Students become unnecessarily depressed, angry and resistant when they feel that there is an implication in the university, among professors, or simply in the air, in the context, that "we can't think."

I would like to propose a definition of "critical thinking" or "analytical writing" which is based on what I have learned from this long-term study: from the reflections of my own teaching practice, from interviews with faculty, from many intense conversations with non-western graduate students about

their writing, and from my friendships and working relationships over a period of five years with graduate students from around the world -- both in the context of the U.S. university and in some of their home countries. Critical thinking made visible, that is, analytical writing, is a culturally specific world view that is individualistic, egalitarian, scientific (which I haven't had a chance to mention, but is worth thinking about), and is based on a direct, sparse, communication style that relies on little shared knowledge between writer and audience.

And finally, I would like to offer a reason for the difficulty that both handbook writers and university professors have in defining "analysis" or "critical thinking." These concepts are culturally specific; we are situated in the world view and communication style that they represent; we have learned them through osmosis from early childhood. They have never been explicitly defined for us because there is no need -- they are so taken for granted, so equated with "thinking," or at any rate, "good thinking," that they need no explanation. Unless, of course, one is on the outside, looking in.

As university and community college writing instructors who teach analytical writing or critical thinking, we should not, I think, create different curricula or different standards for our "World Majority" students, for most of these students want to succeed in our system and become expert in the things we value -- while still retaining their own cultural world view. But we must realize that although critical thinking and analysis is a useful

way of knowing, it is nevertheless culture-bound and only one way among many to understand the world and communicate ideas about it. If we begin to consider this new definition and see if it makes sense in our teaching and research practice, we may be able to get away from using "deficit language" when working with students who seem to be baffled by or resistant to our explanations. When we start using "difference language," as I am starting to do, it will perhaps be easier for us to help students understand what they are doing, what we do, and how we can work together to bridge the gap.

References

Beene, L., Kopple, W.V. The Riverside Handbook. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992

Corbett, E.P.J. The Little English Handbook. Fifth Edition. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co. 1987.

Fox, H. "It's More Than Just a Technique" International Graduate Students' Difficulties With Analytical Writing. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1991.

Hall, E.T. Beyond Culture. New York: Doubleday, 1976.

Herman, W. The Portable English Handbook. Third Edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1986.

Kolln, M. Language and Composition: A Handbook and Rhetoric. New York: Macmillan, 1984.